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ABSTRACT

Given that young people are extremely concerned with how they appear socially, beguiling and glamorous portrayals of smokers in recent films may be contributing to the continual rise in college student smoking. The pervasive positive depiction of smokers as attractive and appealing easily preys on young people who lack confidence and self esteem. It is imperative to assess whether the trend of increased smoking among youth is continuing so that steps can be taken to reverse it. This study focuses on portrayals of smokers and smoking for movies released between 1996 and 1999. A group of trained raters evaluated five movies for each year. The movies were examined for relevant characteristics, including movie genre, approximate running time, and total number of cigarettes seen during the film. Demographics, including age, gender, and smoking status, were recorded for first, second, and third leading characters. Characters were evaluated on several dimensions, including: insecure/confident, unattractive/attractive, unintelligent/intelligent, and unpopular/popular. Results show that 75% of the movies sampled depicted cigarette smoking. Approximately 20% of the leading characters, of whom 85% were male, smoked cigarettes; 26% of the second and third main characters smoked. Among secondary main characters, more males than females smoked; among tertiary main characters, smoking was equal for males and females. Comparisons of personality ratings for smoking versus nonsmoking characters showed significant differences on two variables. Nonsmoking characters were viewed as more considerate and less selfish than smoking characters; although not significant, there was also a trend for nonsmokers to be viewed as more kind and less cruel. (Contains 32 references.) (MKA)

Correcting Media Mis-education:
The Portrayal of Smokers and Smoking
in Top Grossing Films

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Introduction

Throughout the last three decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the patterns of cigarette smoking among different populations. While older Americans are smoking less, there has been an upsurge of smoking among the young adult population; during the 1990s, this was found to be especially true among college students (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1996; Hines, Fretz, & Nolan, 1998; Moore, 1998; Wechsler et al., 1998). While numerous factors influence young people's decision to smoke, the media typically plays a prominent role. Popular tobacco promotional items, magazine advertisements, and certain scenes in movies all encourage positive attitudes towards smoking and foster experimentation with tobacco.

In evaluating media influences, Altman et al. (1996) found that when an adolescent owned a tobacco promotional item and had a friend who owned a promotional item, the chances were 21.8 times greater that this person would become a smoker than a person for whom these tobacco-endorsing items were absent. This finding has contributed to the belief that cigarette advertisements may make an enormous contribution to early smoking initiation (Reid, 1985; Potts, Gillies, & Herbert, 1986; Zinser, Kloosterman, & Williams, 1994; Department of Health and Human Services, 1994; Moore, 1998). Youths' environments were found to be saturated with pro-smoking messages, especially through images presented in magazines (Schooler, Feighery, & Flora, 1996). Magazine advertisements for tobacco products frequently portray exciting, adventurous scenes depicting smokers as glamorous and appealing (Zinser, Kloosterman, & Williams, 1991; Hines et al., 1998; Moore, 1998). A study by Zinser et al. (1991)

discovered that both college student smokers and nonsmokers rated cigarette advertisements as more adventurous in comparison with advertisements for other products. Magazine ad content analyses validated the notion that advertisements were developed by the smoking industry to depict smokers as attractive, athletic, and lively (Albright et al, 1988; Altman et al., 1987; Zinser et al., 1991). Adolescence is a time of preoccupation with one's social image; understandably, many adolescents fall prey to the underlying suggestion that smoking will enhance their allure (Zinser et al., 1991). Past research has revealed that the top-selling cigarette brands that are smoked by the younger population are also the most heavily advertised (Moore, 1998; King et al., 1998).

While tobacco companies use favorable advertisements to promote cigarette smoking, films, too, consistently display smokers in this positive manner. During the 1990's, there has been an increasing amount of attention devoted to portrayal of cigarette usage in films. Hazan, Lipton, & Glantz (1994) found that 80% of new film releases portray smoking in association with positive movie character attributes such as youthfulness, attractiveness, and overall social acceptability. Notably numerous recent films depict exciting scenes involving attractive characters smoking (Chapman & Eggers, 1983). Many of these films cause the audience to misperceive the reality of smoking. Despite the fact that a lower socioeconomic status is associated with smoking in real life (Stronks et al., 1997), the socioeconomic status of smokers in films has apparently increased during the 1990s. One study found that 57% of movie characters of high social standing smoke, yet only 19% of high socioeconomic status individuals actually smoke (Hazan, Lipton, & Glantz, 1994). During the 1980s, 17% of smokers in films were portrayed as having a high socioeconomic status, while that figure rose to 30% in the

1990s (Stockwell & Glantz, 1998). This distorted presentation leads many young people to have an unrealistic view of smoking, wrongly concluding that it is widely accepted and encouraged by the larger society (Pechmann & Shih, 1999).

Negative aspects of smoking, such as adverse health consequences and concern about harmful second hand smoke, are usually ignored in films (Shogren, 1997). Stockwell and Glantz (1997) found that negative health or social effects were only portrayed 14% of the time. Research has found that smoking scenes lead viewers to believe that smoking is attractive and increased their willingness to smoke (Pechmann & Shih, 1999). Scenes containing characters of high social status who smoke may alter the viewers' cognitions about smokers.

High arousal scenes frequently create durable associations between smoking and status of thrilling excitement in audiences. According to the Excitation Transfer Theory, smoking scenes which invoke a high positive arousal can transfer that favorable effect of the scene onto the viewer (Zillmann, 1971). The audience watching scenes depicting high levels of excitement is prone to misconstrue the cause of their arousal, misattributing the high arousal to other available stimulus cues and evaluating these stimuli more positively. For instance, viewing a scene containing high energy, such as a party scene, with many characters smoking, may cause the audience to misattribute the positive energy and enjoyment to smoking.

Simple repeated exposure to something or someone is often powerful enough to increase attraction. This phenomenon, known as the Mere Exposure Effect, states that the more often someone is exposed to a stimulus, the more favorably they begin to evaluate that stimulus (Zajonc, 1968). Because the majority of recent film releases

depict cigarette smoking, this phenomenon may cause avid movie viewers to begin viewing smoking in a more favorable light. Repeated exposure to a product can encourage a consumer to unconsciously become more attracted towards it. Research has shown that even when the viewer cannot recall the initial exposure, preattentive processes begin to establish favorable connections to the target stimulus (Janiszewski, 1993). Therefore, any scenes containing cigarette usage may lead viewers to develop more favorable attitudes towards smoking.

Positive portrayals of smoking in films can be potentially destructive for today's young people. Regardless of the maturity of particular adolescents and young adults, their views can still be significantly swayed by their cultural context. In fact, social factors have been found to play a very prominent role in a young person's decision to smoke. Peer smoking behavior has been implicated as an influential contributor to teenager's smoking (Biglan et al., 1983; Castro et al., 1987; Charlton & Blair, 1989; Covey & Tam, 1990; Thrush et al., 1997; Moore, 1998). Often adolescents believe that if they smoke they will be perceived positively in terms of sophistication, attractiveness, and/or social successfulness by their peers (Barton et al., 1982; Burton et al., 1989; Thrush et al., 1997; Moore, 1998). This is not only true of adolescents, but of college students as well. Research by Bartlett et al. (1999) suggests that concern about appearing sophisticated, mature, and attractive figure prominently in the decision of college students to smoke.

Given that young people are extremely concerned with how they appear socially, beguiling and glamorous portrayals of smokers in recent films may be contributing to the continual rise in college student smoking. The pervasive positive depiction of smokers as

attractive and appealing easily preys on those young people who lack confidence and self-esteem or are in search of ways to increase their allure and popularity. Improving one's outward appearance becomes a primary reason for many to begin or continue smoking. In movies released between 1990 and 1996, tobacco was viewed once every three to five minutes, an all-time high rate seen on film (Stockwell & Glantz, 1997). Because of the increasing rate of smoking among our youth, it is imperative to assess whether this trend is continuing so steps can be taken to reverse it. This study extended the Stockwell & Glantz (1997) analysis, by focusing on portrayals of smokers and smoking for movies released between 1996 and 1999.

Methods

A list of the twenty top grossing movies from the years 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 was obtained. From this list five movies from each year were randomly selected. A group of trained raters evaluated the movies for relevant characteristics, including movie genre, approximate running time, and total number of cigarettes seen during the film. Demographics were recorded for the first, second, and third leading characters including age, gender, and smoking status. In response to the query "How is the character generally portrayed?", raters used a three-point Likert scale (1 being the least positive) to evaluate each character on the following dimensions: selfish/considerate, cruel/kind, rebellious/compliant, crude/sophisticated, poor/wealthy, insecure/confident, angry/happy, unattractive/attractive, tense/relaxed, immature/mature, unintelligent/intelligent, and unpopular/popular.

Results

Seventy-five percent of the 1996-1999 movies sampled depicted cigarette smoking. However, only approximately 20% of the leading characters (85% of whom were male) in the movies sampled smoked cigarettes. Twenty-six percent of the second and third main characters smoked. Among secondary main characters, more males smoked (63%) than females, and among tertiary main characters smoking was equal for males and females. Only 5% of the movies sampled featured three or more main characters who smoked.

A one-way ANOVA was used to compare each of the four years' of films in terms of the total number of cigarette smoking episodes portrayed in each film. No significant differences across years were found.

Comparisons of personality ratings for smoking versus nonsmoking characters showed significant differences on two variables. Nonsmoking characters were viewed as more considerate ($p < .01$) and less selfish ($p < .01$) than smoking characters. Though not significant, there was also a trend for nonsmokers to be viewed as more kind and less cruel ($p = .09$).

Discussion

The current findings indicate that the majority of late 1990s movies expose members of the audience to role models who smoke cigarettes. Given the growing consensus regarding the negative health effects of smoking, and findings demonstrating that positive portrayals of smoking in advertisements induce people to start smoking, the high frequency of smoking observed in the movies sampled is somewhat alarming. Routine witnessing of movie characters' smoking may subtly alter attitudes toward this

behavior; increased acceptance of smoking may be a consequence of this steady exposure because affinity tends to increase with exposure and familiarity.

However, the present analyses also showed that only a minority of the leading characters were smokers, which may attenuate these negative effects somewhat. Perhaps the movie industry may be refraining from including smoking in the characterization of leading men in order to reduce negative influences on viewers. Consistent with this is the finding that only a small minority of films included three or more main characters who smoked cigarettes.

It is reasonable to assume that the type of role a smoker plays influences the impact of the film character's smoking status on the viewer. When highly charismatic, attractive, compelling characters are seen smoking cigarettes, the audience may be more likely to view smoking positively. In contrast, when unsavory, antisocial, unscrupulous characters are shown smoking, this may serve as a deterrent to the audience's smoking. The current study found a tendency for the negative personality attributes of selfishness, cruelty, and inconsiderateness to be linked with smoking behavior in the movies sampled. This negative portrayal of film smokers may actually serve to decrease the perceived attractiveness of smoking to many viewers. Future research should explore the generalizability of this finding, and assess this hypothesized impact on the audience.

Although smoking prevalence in movies increased through the early 90's, this study indicates a leveling off towards the end of the decade. Perhaps the use of tobacco in films is decreasing as a result of the increased awareness of the harmful effects of misleading images of smoking and decreased acceptance of smoking among older adults.

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